Waulking-boards and broomsticks

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I used a story from "Tocher" no. 58 (just out) to show that if a girl was banging away with cloth along with the other women at the waulking-board, her "strong and undue wishes" could send her *alter ego* in the form of an animal or a bird to give her straying boyfriend a good thrashing.

The "Tocher" story provided me with my text: *Bha i a' luadhadh an-seo air a' chléith, agus gam mhurt air an rathad*. "She was waulking here on the board, and murdering me on the road."

This is a metaphor so powerful that it was believed capable of transformation into reality. There may have been an element of what anthropologists call "imitative magic" in it too – "voodoo", to you and me. What the women were pounding on the table was newly-woven cloth soaked in urine (to bring up the nap). If the cloth was from wool supplied by the lover, or was intended to be worn by him, it was effectively part of him, and violence done to it could be made into violence done to himself.

Similarly, the urine had been contributed over a period by everyone in the community – including him. The power of thought – or, better still, of an impromptu line or two about the man in question thrown into a waulking-song – directed the violence at him where it hurt most.

The poet Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair knew these stories. When he and his wife and children were in hiding after Culloden there was little he could do but make songs about how, when Charles came back as promised with a decent force of French or Spanish troops, the Highland people would join them for another campaign and revenge themselves on the occupying Red Army. The obvious metaphor for this was waulking, so the form he chose was that of an *òran luaidh*. This is the start of "Òran Luaidh no Fùcaidh" ("The Waulking or Fulling Song"):

A Mhórag chiatach a' chùil dhualaich,
Gur h-è do luaidh a tha air m' aire.

Ma dh'imich thu nunn thar chuan uainn,
Guma luath a thig thu thairis.

Cuimhnich, thoir leat bannal ghruagach
A luaidheas an clò ruadh gu daingean.

Charles's code-name Morag was a gift for this subject. So was the pun *luaidh* (praising, waulking). "Lovely Morag of the curly hair, / Your waulking-praise is my intention. / If you've sailed away and left us, / May you quickly come back over. / Remember, bring a band of maidens / Who will waulk the red cloth firmly."

It turns into a love-song in praise of Morag, describing her – sorry, him – explicitly as a woman. Then he moves on to her lovers, the Highland clans. He describes them quite conventionally as warriors, but comes back to the waulking image at the end. "All the Gael would crowd around you, / No matter who else rose or waited. / Ten thousand of them sat at waulking-boards / In the late King Charles's war. / Many a cloth they raised a nap on / Between Sutherland and Annan. / When others refused to waulk for you, / They gathered their waulking warband (*sluagh am bannail*)."

Another gift to the poet was that the British army's coats were the colour of blood. He ends *O Rìgh, bu mhaith san luadh-làimh iad . . .* "God, their hands were good for waulking / Whenever they unsheathed their swords. / Each cloth they ever waulked for you / They left it beautiful and firm, / Tight, thick, firm, well-woven, waulked, / *Daithte ruadh* (Coloured red) from being dyed with blood. / Hurry across with your waulking women / And our girls will go with you as well."

Alastair was on to a wonderful idea, and in "Clò MhicilleMhìcheil" ("Carmichael's Cloth") he developed it further. As I pointed out here a couple of years ago, Carmichael was a Leith merchant who did a roaring trade in Jacobite tartans; you'll find the poem in Ann Lorne Gillies's splendid new book "Songs of Gaelic Scotland". Here Charles is naked, and the violence required to clothe him is, of course, clothmaking.

Chuir an Roinn Eòrpa clò am beairt dhuit
'S gus an tig e ás cha bhi sìth ann . . .

Gum bi do chlò ruadh-sa luaidhte
Le gaorr, fuil is fual ga shlìobadh.

"Europe has put cloth in a loom for you / And till it comes out there will be no peace. / Your red cloth will have been waulked / By rubbing with gore, blood and urine."

This time it's not Charles who is presented as female but the Highland clans, who are all described as coming to the waulking – a daring innovation, and it works. For example:

Maighdeanan lurach Chlann Mhuirich,
Luaidhidh iad tuilleadh 's mìolan —

Luaidheadh clò leibh ann an Clifton
'S dh'fhàgadh Honiwood 'na shìneadh . . .

Gun tig bannal mór Chlann Chatain
'S bheir iad caitean air luchd mìoruin.

"The lovely girls of Clan MacPherson, / They will waulk far more than lice – / Some cloth was waulked by you in Clifton / And Honeywood was left prostrate . . . / Clan Chattan's big waulking-band will come / And raise a nap on our opponents." The reference is to the MacPhersons' defeat of a force under Lt-Col. Sir Philip Honeywood at Clifton on 18 December 1745; Honeywood slipped on a turd and went down under a rain of blows, but survived with cuts to the head.

By the time Alastair returns at the end to his theme of clothing Charles in his royal mantle, he's bursting with rage – at King George, the "whore's son" of Jacobite propaganda, being on the throne; at the crucial failure of kindreds like the MacLeods and Sleat MacDonalds to join the cause; at the disgrace of his own clan, the MacDonalds, in the battle of Culloden; and, underlying everything, at the abolition of the Highland dress, a humiliating measure aimed alike at those who fought for Charles and those who didn't.

Cuireamaid 'na éideadh Teàrlach,
Stracamaid an àird ar dìcheall,

Na b' ionann seo 's an luadhadh dosgach
A bha 'n Cùil Lodair nuair a phill sinn . . .

A mhaighdeanan còire gràdhach,
Luaidhibh is tàirnibh is sìnibh,

Dèanaibh an luadh-làimh gu guineach
'S thugaibh fuil air mac na strìopaich.

Mìle marbhaisg air na brùidibh
Nach d'rinn fùcadh 'na thìm dhuit,

'S dh'fhaodadh e bhith 'n-dràsta umad
'Na thrusgan urramach rìoghail.

"Let's put Charlie in his raiment, / And ratchet up our best endeavours, / Not like in that tragic waulking / When we retreated at Culloden . . . / Dear girls who've so much love to give, / Waulk and pull and stretch the cloth, / Put venom into the hand-waulking / And cause the son-of-a-whore to bleed. / A thousand curses on the brutes / Who didn't waulk in time for you – / You could have had it on already / As an honoured royal mantle."

Waulking is also a metaphor for sexual activity. It's not a subject I can discuss here, but perhaps the Editor will allow me to mention a couple of websites which will enable you to pursue it further if you can read Gaelic. One is www.millahuilerud.com/orain.html (a rock band

with a distinctive line in lyrics). The other is www.sandstonepress.com – click "Pearls" and you'll find a fine new novel called "Litir à Ameireagaidh" by Flòraidh NicDhòmhnaill. It's at least as good as some of the Gaelic fiction being published on paper these days.

But I want to go back to "Tocher" no. 58. Another story in it that caught my eye is "An Diabhol agus na Boireannaich". It's a version of one we usually call "Man drowns witches who are sailing in sieves". Basically, the husband of one of the witches follows his wife, she meets the other women, and they set sail in their sieves, but he watches them from the shore, invokes the Trinity, and they all drown. The "Tocher" version was noted down in Perthshire Gaelic from a man in Dowally in 1891, and is set *ann am baile anns an taobh tuath* ("in a town in the north"). In it the husband finds out what his wife is planning and joins the other women in her place, wearing her clothes.

He comes to the edge of a loch and sees the devil sitting on top of a rock on the other side. They get into riddles and start to cross. *Agus bha 'n dà shùil aig an diabhol deanamh solais dhaibh – bha e 'na shuidhe air a' chraig*. "And the devil's two eyes gave them light – he was sitting on the crag." The man makes sure he's the last to leave the shore, and when the witches are in the middle of the loch he says: *Gun gléidh an Nì Math sinn*. "God preserve us." Darkness descends and the women are drowned.

I've never come across a portrayal of the devil like this in Gaelic stories from the West Highlands. He's not normally present at all in "Man drowns witches who are sailing in sieves". This scene reminds me of "Tam O'Shanter", where

Even Satan glowr'd, and fidg'd fu' fain,
And hotch'd and blew wi' might and main

while the women dance. It reminds me even more of the confessions of Isobel Gowdie, who was tried for witchcraft at Auldearn in Nairnshire in 1662. Isobel portrayed the devil as a master fletcher (arrowmaker), sitting in his workshop surrounded by craftsmen, or out at night poaching human flesh, for example: "Bessie and Margaret Wilson in Auldearn, John Taylor and his wife, Margaret Brodie and I, and the devil, were together, and Mr Harry Forbes, minister at Auldearn, going to Moynes. The devil gave Margaret Brodie an arrow to shoot at him, which she did, but it came short, and the devil caused take it up again.

"We desired to shoot again, but the devil said, no, we would not get his life at that time! The devil caused me to shoot at the laird of Park, as he was crossing the burn of the Boath, but I missed him."

When I got to the end of the story in "Tocher" and read what was said about its origins, all became clear. It had been related to Donald Douglas in Dowally by Hugh Fraser, a watchmaker in Dunkeld who was from the north. Fraser was thus from much the same part of the world as Isobel Gowdie, with the same strange mix of Highland–Lowland background.

Another fascinating thing about this version is its use of broomsticks. I can't remember coming across a broomstick in a Gaelic story before. But these women don't ride on them. When they go away in the night they leave a broomstick (*gath-sguabaich* or *gas-sguabaich*) in the bed to fool their husbands into thinking that they're still there. And sure enough, when the witches are drowned that's what their husbands find in the bed in the morning.

Now this *is* a concept I'm very familiar with from West Highland stories, except that it takes the form of a log, "stock" or block of wood, in Gaelic *stoc*. It isn't a means of transport but a symbol of death, used to show that the person's spirit is elsewhere. One of John Gregorson Campbell's little anecdotes is typical. A man suspected that his wife had been stolen by the fairies. He hauled her by the legs from the bed, through the fire and out the door. "She there became a log of wood, and serves as the threshold of a barn in the place to this day."

So once again we see that this version of "Man drowns witches who are sailing in sieves" is taking Lowland and Highland motifs and mixing them up.

The "Tocher" website is www.celtscot.ed.ac.uk/tocher.htm. Why not send someone a subscription as a Christmas present? They'll throw in a free handmade card.

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